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ABSTRACT

Colorado rural special educators are experiencing tremendous challenges in providing mandated transition services to students with special needs. The School of Education and the Department of Occupational Therapy at Colorado State University have developed a program to create rural transition specialists through preservice and inservice training for rural special educators and school-based occupational therapists. Each year of the 3-year project, titled "Partners in Transition," one team of special educators from a rural district is selected to participate. The Occupational Therapy Department selects two graduate students to be trained with the rural special education team, and to provide assistance with transition-related activities in the district during the following school year. Issues addressed through staff development activities include continuing professional development in rural settings, isolation among professionals, need for creativity and ingenuity, small budgets, personality styles, empowerment, distance learning, self-assessment, and the use of community resources. The program is based on a staff development model with a goal of empowering learners that includes four steps: personal reflection, knowledge seeking, demonstration of new skills, and continued networking. The program's nine components are self-assessment, empowerment activities, use of condensed courses, interdisciplinary teaming between special education and occupational therapy, individualized internship opportunities, overcoming problems of "local history," use of community supports, education in technology, and distance education activities. The project is evaluated by the faculty and participants. When current federal funding expires, the program will become a permanent university offering supported by student tuition. (TD)

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PARTNERS IN TRANSITION: PREPARING TRANSITION SPECIALISTS

Introduction

While Public Law 101-476 mandates transition planning and services for all students with special needs, little is available in the rules and regulations to guide transition practices in rural environments. To date, research and/or demonstration articles and presentations have reflected transition practices in primarily urban or suburban environments. These practices are difficult to replicate in rural environments where financial constraints of schools and community are prohibitive.

The rural areas of the state of Colorado are not exempt from these difficulties. According to the 1992 Colorado Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CCSPD), the area of transition remains the greatest single area of need in terms of personnel preparation. This finding corroborates the recent Colorado State Plan for Vocational Education, which acknowledges the growing need for educational personnel to work with students with disabilities in vocational education as part of successful transition outcomes. Additionally, simple compliance with the mandates of P.L. 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, mandates that an increasing number of educators and related service professionals become proficient in providing transition services. For professionals working in rural areas, the need is even greater, due to constant lack of resources (Coombe, 1993; Johnson, Pugach & Cook, 1993; Wei, Shapero & Boggess, 1993).

Occupational therapists (OT), whose primary goal is to provide "whole-person" services to students with disabilities, are ironically working very little with transition-aged students, and find themselves under prepared to provide transition-related services. A recent nationwide study of school-based occupational therapists (Inge, 1995) found that only 29% of the OT's actually worked with students in the transition ages of 14-22. The survey found that while the average occupational therapist serves somewhere around 34 children birth to 13 years of age, they only served 6 students aged 14-16, three aged 17-19, and less than one child aged 20-22 (mean = 0.88). Additionally, when school OT's served transitioning youth, 67% stated that they did not assist in community-based goals and training. Only 20% of the OT's actually participated in transdisciplinary planning for students. Overall, the OT's felt that the educational teams did not understand the potential role of OT in the transition process. Furthermore, the OT's, themselves felt they need much more training on OT for students in providing transition-related services.

With Colorado rural special educators experiencing tremendous challenges in providing mandated transition services, and with a potentially strong member of their service team (occupational therapy) usually not included in the process, some form of university-based training intervention seemed appropriate. In the fall of 1993, the School of Education along with the Department of Occupational Therapy at Colorado State University applied for a staff development/personnel preparation grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. The project, titled "Partners in Transition" (PIT), was funded and began operation in the summer of 1994.

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The purpose of the project is to create rural transition specialists in Colorado, through pre-service and in-service training for rural special educators and school-based occupational therapists. Each year of the three year project, one team of special educators from a rural district of Colorado is selected to participate in the PIT staff development project. Since at this time very few occupational therapists are included on Colorado school district transition teams, the Occupational Therapy Department selects two graduate students each year to be trained with the rural special education team, and to provide needed assistance with transition-related activities in the district the school year following the training.

A simple needs-directed approach has been taken to the training model designed for the Partners in Transition project. Each planning, training, and evaluating activity is based on the self-identified needs of the team chosen for training. The remainder of this paper will discuss the model which has been developed, its implementation, ideas for replication, and evaluation activities.

Training Model

The Partners in Transition project is structured entirely around rural service delivery issues in the area of transition. The issues addressed through the staff development activities include: continuing professional development in rural settings, isolation among professionals, need for creativity and ingenuity, small budgets, personality styles, empowerment, distance learning, self-assessment, and the use of community resources. The model has been developed in collaboration with, and piloted with a team of rural special educators, administrators, occupational therapy graduate students, and PIT project staff (university instructors).

Fullan (1993) has described a staff development model with a goal of empowering learners. Fullan's model includes four steps: personal reflection, knowledge seeking, demonstration of new skills, and continued networking. The PIT training model is based on Fullan's model, and includes nine critical components:

1. Self Assessment

A comprehensive survey ("Transition Competency Assessment"), consisting of needed transition-related proficiencies is given to each team member prior to their participation in the project. The survey covers every skill necessary for transition team members to perform successfully. The survey includes such transition skill areas as: Assessment, Planning, Preparation/Training, Collaboration, and Leadership. Each team member completes the assessment, and includes examples of scenarios where their skills or lack of skills have most been exemplified. Once the surveys are collected and reviewed, the PIT project team begins developing the "Summer Institute" (based on the recommendations of Heller, 1991), which will be offered to assist the participants in developing the skills they feel they are lacking.

In the first year of the project, the surveys showed a variety of strengths and weaknesses, which were then distilled through a focus group meeting held with the participants. The focus group was held in the rural town which houses the team's Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) office. The results from the assessment surveys were used to develop the questions for the focus group. All the participants were required to attend the focus group, and to assist in developing a final document of overall learning needs of the team. For example, the project's first year the focus group meeting yielded a three item list of major learning needs related to transition: Communication, Family Involvement, and Resource Development. These topics, then served as the basis for learning activities offered through the summer courses the participants attended.

2. Empowerment Activities

Although the project staff work at length with the special education administrators in participating districts as the initial assessment and training activities are developed, the administrators are encouraged before long to step back, and let the participants control their own learning. Administrators are not included in the focus group or the summer classes. Project staff keep the administrators informed of agendas, syllabi, and upcoming educational events. The participants are also encouraged to increase communication with administrators to inform them of their progress. The participants, though, are given full rein in outlining needs, choosing learning activities and projects, and assisting in project evaluation. The administrators need to agree to give authority to the participants to carry out projects and activities within their own schools and within their communities. Without this agreement, the participants feel unempowered and stymied by "the system."

Other empowerment activities include the self-assessment activities described above, as well as the individualized internship and education in technology activities discussed below.In many ways empowerment has become a primary focus of the Partners in Transition project.

3. Use of Condensed Courses

All participants are expected to complete a specified set of classes to obtain their vocational credential from the Colorado Community College and Occupational Education System (CCCOES) as a "Transition Specialist." Courses required for the credential include 1) Career Development Institute, 2) Summer Transition Institute, 3) Transition and Community Based Training and 4) Occupational Information and Job Placement. Students desiring also to obtain their masters in education degree with an emphasis in transition services, must complete additional coursework, as well as a research project. The occupational therapy graduate students complete the same courses as the special educators working toward their "Transition Specialist" credential, but receive a completion certificate if they are ineligible for formal vocation credentialing.

Several of the courses required for the "Transition Specialist" credential are presented in a condensed format, so that participants receive intensive on-site learning activities, followed by projects to be completed back at their schools. This makes the classroom-based learning activities more convenient for the participants, allows time for participants to get to know each other better as they spend full days and evenings together, and facilitates practical application as the students take their new skills and apply them to situations in their district. In the future, some of these courses will be offered through interactive video.

4. Interdisciplinary Teaming Between Special Education and Occupational Therapy

The participating rural team is assigned two graduate occupational therapy students, as was mentioned above. The OT students participate in the condensed courses with the rural team, work side-by-side in the development of projects and learning activities, and then go with the rural team members back to their districts to assist in project implementation. During the condensed courses, the special educators and occupational therapy students compare official roles, desired roles, and areas where roles can be "released." During the PIT project, all team members have learned that special educators view occupational therapists very narrowly, assuming that they are only "motor therapists," or hand-writing consultants. Both the OT students and the educators have learned to look at occupational therapy and its holistic approach to services, as an ideal discipline to address transition services. In this arena, the participants have a great deal to teach their administrators about the role of OT in public schools.

The OT students are required to complete their masters thesis research in an area related to transition of people with special needs, and then to complete one of their mandatory three month fieldwork experiences in a transition-related setting. With their on-site training with the PIT participants, their research, and their fieldwork, the OT graduates are entering the field of school-based OT with the skills to create major change in the role of OT. In return, the special educators have learned to explore the addition of OT's in their transition planning and services teams.

5. Individualized Internship Opportunities

Each special education participant is required to complete one three credit internship in the area of transition. The OT students, as mentioned above, have a much longer internship requirement as part of their masters work. Once the special education participants have completed the condensed courses, and have become more knowledgeable about their individual learning needs, they are asked to design an internship to meet those needs. A formal contract is developed, containing goals, activities, and timelines. Each participant is then assigned a project staff member to serve as a support person as the individual implements his/her internship contract. One internship involved planning, fund-raising, and completing a ski-program for students with emotional disorders who are in need of developing appropriate recreational skills. This internship included the use of one of the OT students to assist in designing ski lessons which would be helpful for youth with special needs. It was a powerful collaborative project between a special educator and an occupational therapist. Another internship involved a special educator meeting regularly with a program administrator from the local community college to learn how best to plug her students into postsecondary education opportunities.

6. Overcoming Problems of "Local History"

Many of the rural special educators are plagued by their school or program's history with the community and within the district. It is particularly difficult in rural areas to escape a reputation which is negative, whether it is deserved or not. The very nature of rural life is to keep track of what is going on in the community. This includes the schools. Through the Partners in Transition project, special educators are given the opportunity to explore how to create change, even when expectations from fellow teachers or community members is low. Such phrases as, "We already tried that and it didn't work," are discouraged. Project participants are challenged mentally to wipe the slate clean, and explore change which is unattached to history. New approaches to reaching and educating the community are explored, and the participants agree to support each other aggressively as they seek to implement change in their programs and schools.

Personality styles and ways to deal with differences and conflicts are explored by participants. Each individual learns about their unique approach to their work and to people, and then seeks suggestions from others about how best to work with them. Once project participants become comfortable with their own styles, they are able to examine why they may get into conflict with co-workers, students, parents, and administrators. When participants are able to articulate areas of communication which are very difficult for them, they receive advice and suggestions from others about actions they can take. Finally, the individuals come to realize that the very nature of their personality may make some activities insufferable, and that they need to learn to ask for help from others at those times, so that necessary activities are not placed on the mental "back burner," due their undesirability.

7. Use of Community Supports

Participants in the Partners in Transition project are encouraged to view their local community as a partner in the transition planning process, instead of a judgmental adversary. Through their learning activities the participants describe elements needed to make transition successful for their students, and then

decide how various entities in the community can help make it possible. Additionally, the participants plan how to keep the community informed of the students' transition activities, so that the community can feel as supportive of those students as they do student athletes or student scholars. One recent participant explored the possibility of highlighting transitioning students on place mats used at a popular local pizzeria. The goal of the publicity would be to brag about the students, let potential employers know the students are looking for good jobs, and drum up local support for the teacher and his program.

Throughout their tenure in the PIT project, the participants are challenged to reevaluate the role the community has in the transition project. It becomes apparent that the community needs to be reminded that it has the subsequent responsibility for young adults with disabilities, and that a collaborative partnership between the community and the schools while students are still young, will enhance success for everyone involved. This is particularly true in rural settings, where the local community knows the students, and may have become divested of them, during the years the students have been in school. Through using community resources, the participating teachers assist in getting the community reacquainted with the students who will soon be entering the community as adults.

8. Education in Technology

The term "technology" means many different things in today's world. Its definition in the PIT project is also quite broad. Participants (teachers and occupational therapy students) have a strong interest in the use of technology as a technique to increase students with disabilities' learning. This includes assistive technology for motor or communication needs. Through the PIT project participants are exposed to state and local resources for assistive technology. The participants are not trained in the use of assistive technology, because that would be an entire credentialing process in itself. They are, however, exposed to possibilities, and given contact information where they may obtain assistance in accessing assistive technology evaluations and equipment. One of the occupational therapy students from the first year of the project chose a fieldwork internship at an assistive technology resource center, partly as a result of her exposure through the PIT project.

Another form of technology the participants of the PIT project are exposed to involves the world of telecommunications and computerized communication. All participants are trained to access an on-line service, and are given the opportunity to "surf" to see what resources are available in the "cyber world." Many of the participants have expressed excitement about learning how to look for grant funders, find special education literature, and to use electronic mail. Even though many of the participants do not have access to computers with on-line capabilities in their district, they have become enthusiastic about using their home computers for this purpose. The PIT staff are available to communicate with these individuals over the computer, and hope to do more of this in the future. Unfortunately, as with many new and innovative teaching devices, the costs are often prohibitive to many rural school districts.

9. Distance Education Activities

Literature about training educators in rural areas suggests that distance education that combines face-to-face meetings and technology interaction provides information in a flexible and effective way (Kapczyk, Rhodes, Marche & Chapman, 1994; Jansen & Davies, 1996). When choosing the delivery modalities and information/experiences to be delivered, distance, cost, and effectiveness were all factors considered. Thus, as shown in Table 1, components of year one included condensed courses (i.e., an on-campus three day institute), networking sessions, E-mail, telephone and site visits by university faculty.

An important supplement to the condensed courses is the technical assistance offered by project staff to the participants, following completion of the condensed courses. This technical assistance is

provided on-site out in the rural schools, through phone call consultations, through networking meetings with all participants at a nearby restaurant, and in some cases through the use of electronic mail. The participants continue their learning as they complete their chosen projects, implement short and long-term goals they have created, and seek to create change in "the system." Partners in Transition project staff serve as resources on an as-needed basis.

Our initial site included schools in one district that were separated from each other by vast geographic distances but were relatively close to the University (e.g., 25 to 60 miles). The last year has been one of learning and evaluating what works and what can be adjusted to be more effective. Knowledge gained from the experiences are guiding the development of Site Two and the selection of delivery modalities that best meet the needs of this location. Additional factors will influence the technologies to be used. Site Two is located 180 miles from the university's main campus. There is a community college at this site that has distance learning capabilities. This allows several courses to be delivered using interactive video. A university faculty member will be temporarily located at the distance learning site to provide advising and instruction to the rural cohort group.

Table 1
Site One

Delivery Modality	Location	Outcome
Condensed Courses	• Three days on campus	• develop cohort groups • gain technology skills • develop projects for the year
Networking Sessions	• 4-5 through out year • off campus, within site • university staff travels	• provide current information via guest speakers • allow ongoing evaluation • time to share individual experiences
E-mail	• At individual participants location (work, home)	• provide meeting/program information • link cohort members • link to the university
Telephone	•	• individual conferencing
Site Visits	• university faculty travels to location • cohort travels to another's location	• Face-to-Face sharing • provide on-site support/assist • develop knoeledge of each other's environments

Evaluation

The PIT project is evaluated on two different levels. First, the process of the project is evaluated in an on-going fashion. Project staff meet once each month at a minimum to review the goals of the project, to determine progress towards the goals, and to plan for future project activities. Additionally, each condensed course is aggressively evaluated at each step by the participants, to make certain that all activities are addressing their self-identified needs. On-site visits by project staff to participants provide many informal activities to receive feedback concerning the efficacy of the project's staff and their support activities. Finally, on a quarterly basis, the entire team meets to network with each other, report on on-going activities, and create new lists of support needs.

The second level of evaluation involves the creation of products. The PIT project has agreed to develop lists of completed research projects, systems change activities, manuscripts, degreed students, credentialed participants, and dissemination/replication activities. These lists are compiled on an annual basis, and show the U.S. Department of Education that the project is functioning as proposed.

Ramifications of Current Legislative Activities, Budget Cuts, and Program Closures for Future Transition Specialist Training Efforts

It is the intention of the Partners in Transition project, that by the end of the three federally funded project years the PIT project will become a permanent education program of the School of Education at Colorado State University. With current budget cuts, even the U.S. Department of Education program which funded the PIT project has been cut dramatically. Even though transition planning and services are mandated by law, congress is decreasing what little funding currently exists to ensure compliance and provide assistance.

If everything progresses as planned at Colorado State University, the curriculum for the "Transition Specialist" credential and master program will be a permanent offering, self-supporting through the tuition of students. The assistance provided by the project staff will become that provided by any instructor of a university graduate course. As the project increases its use of distance education activities, students from other universities in other states will be able to take many of the courses, complete internships and projects in their own areas, thus developing the skills necessary to be competent "Transition Specialists."

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